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James B. Freeman

Hunter College of The City University of New York

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Reply to Commentary on “The Method of Relevant Variables, Objectivity, and Bias”

JAMES B. FREEMAN

*Department of Philosophy
Hunter College of The City University of New York
695 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10065
U. S. A.
jffreeman@hunter.cuny.edu*

I want to thank Andrei Moldovan for his comments on my paper, especially since they help clarify points about the method of relevant variables. First, Moldovan points out the importance of imagination in taking stock of the relevant variables. I completely agree. Our recognizing a relevant variable involves imagining that some values of some variable *could* constitute counterexamples to the generalization we are testing. Certainly, our failure to recognize the possibility of those values’ being defeaters need not be due to bias on our part. There may be a number of other factors hampering our recognition. Failure of imagination may be the generic reason for this lack of recognition, failure due to bias simply being one case.

Moldovan next points out that a warrant need not express a causal connection. I completely agree. Moral warrants are not causal. But I have one caveat. The warrant must correspond to more than an accidental generalization, but rather a subjunctive conditional. To adapt Moldovan’s example, for the warrant

From: x is a time when the needle of the barometer is going down
To infer: it will start to rain soon after x

to be an acceptable inference licence, we need to have more than just an extensional connection between premise and conclusion. As of the time of OSSA 2016, no woman had been President of the United States. But surely the inference rule

From: x is a woman
To infer: x will never be President of the United States

is unacceptable. The corresponding subjunctive conditional is counterexampled in many possible worlds.

Finally, contrary to Moldovan, the method of relevant variables does not assume that there is only one reason for a given conclusion. A relevant variable is a set of conditions which may possibly constitute counterexamples to a given generalization (corresponding to a warrant) and thus each being contradictory to the generalization. This in no way implies that there is no other generalization with a different antecedent and the same consequent corresponding to a reliable warrant. The second generalization could pass its own canonical test. Here the relevant variables will be sets of conditions possibly giving rise to counterexamples to this second generalization, which may be a very different set from the relevant variables in the first canonical test. The generalizations may be consistent with each other and both correspond to acceptable inference licences.